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ABSTRACT

Building awareness of the self as learner is central to learning. Reflecting on past experiences helps individuals elucidate undetected characteristics of themselves as learners. Active learners are more likely to experiment with new learning strategies and take risks. Because of their inquiring dispositions, they self-monitor and self-evaluate their progress. People increase their efficiency and effectiveness as learners when they can apply a full array of learning skills, strategies, and tools. Learners need to be adaptive to diverse learning contexts. Learning to learn entails recognizing the causes and effects of peak learning, as well as developing coping strategies for mental blocks, blindspots, and other barriers. People learn how to learn as they gain understanding, exert control over their learning, and cultivate their learning competencies. Learning dilemmas call for a self-monitoring process that allows people to make informed judgments about the best strategies for specific learning situations. Building competence as a learner requires alertness to the processes of learning. Individuals can keep tabs of the processes by self-questioning, monitoring, and regulating their learning. Facilitating learning to learn includes helping people become aware of their habits as learners. Supportive learning environments should contain structured activities that provide insight about the processes of learning to both the learner and the facilitator. (Contains 16 references.) (YLB)

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Learning to Learn: Western Perspectives¹

Gene L. Roth

The late Robert M. Smith was a friend of mine who also happened to be an internationally acclaimed writer on the topic of learning to learn. Dr. Smith died slightly over a year ago, and his friends and colleagues in the field of adult education miss him dearly. Dr. Smith, more so than any other scholar, brought to our attention the notion that people are unfinished products as learners. From his vantage point, all learners have room for improvement. And most importantly, Dr. Smith explained how adult educators can help people enhance their knowledge and skills as learners.

Dr. Smith developed a framework for the learning to learn concept that allowed the rest of us understand its relationships with knowing and learning. He described learning to learn as an umbrella concept that can be construed as a goal, process, or area of inquiry (Smith, 1990). As a goal, he described it as a means to become more effective as a learner--regardless of the context that one encounters. As a process, he explained how learning to learn processes and activities can be adopted, practiced, and refined by one's self or through the facilitation of others. And as an area of inquiry, he acknowledged the expanding literature base related to learning to learn and the need to inform practitioners and policy makers of its significance.

The purpose of this paper is two-fold. First, the writer is honored to highlight the contributions of Robert M. Smith at this international conference. Second, the writer will focus on select components of learning to learn and note recent developments. Although it is beyond the purpose of this paper to provide an exhaustive analysis of the learning to learn concept, several components will be emphasized:

- Increasing the awareness of self-as-learner
- Becoming an active and assertive learner
- Expanding the learner's repertoire of learning strategies
- Compensating for personal learning deficiencies
- Building skills in self-monitoring and reflection
- Facilitating learning to learn

Increasing the awareness of self-as-learner

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Regardless of the time and effort that people devote to formal education, few adults take the initiative to intensely focus on themselves as learners. For many adults, the outcomes of learning activities have been the foci of their attention. In most learning situations, the processes of learning are considered to be secondary to the results of the learning task. Conversely, learning to learn is a personal, deliberate, focused attention on the processes of learning. More than merely developing a set of isolated learning remedies, learning to learn represents a rich mixture of skills, knowledge and abilities that are embedded in learning processes.

Learning to learn is an integrated, holistic, and systemic approach to enhancing one's efficiency and effectiveness as a learner. It moves people toward a critical consciousness of their learning processes. It encourages people to examine their judgements and actions that occur before, during and after learning experiences. This introspection and complementary action leads people to heightened insights concerning themselves as learners.

Building awareness of self as learner is central learning to learn. Self awareness requires people to step back from the learning processes and take stock of the situation. Self-questioning is a requisite skill for building awareness of self as learner. Learners need a critical eye to detect tacit attitudes, knowledge, and/or behaviors that impede their learning prowess. A helicopter view of the learning situation can be prompted by questions such as:

- How am I going about this?
 - What seems to be working well?
 - Which learning strategies seem to have little utility for me?
 - Which alternative strategies might be most effective?
 - Which strategies hold the greatest probability of success--given what I know about the easy or difficult nature of this task?
 - What can I predict as an outcome of this?
- Reflecting on past learning experiences helps individuals tease out undetected

characteristics of themselves as learners. Personal reflection can break down calcified learning habits and patterns. Writing a personal learning history is an example of a reflective activity that can help individuals critique their prior learning situations. A learning history can be a response to the following types of questions:

- Why am I this type of learner?
- Which past learning experiences were the most powerful?
- What were the characteristics of those experiences?
- Why were some learning experiences easy and effortless?
- Why have other learning situations been uncomfortable?
- What were the contexts for my successful and unsuccessful learning experiences?
- Why am I anxious about certain learning situations?
- Why am I confident about certain learning situations?
- What bothers me the most about my learning?

A personal learning history helps track the evolution of a learner. It documents the mile posts of one's personal learning journey.

Becoming an active and assertive learner

Active learners are the pioneers and discoverers in the vast territory of learning to learn. They doggedly seek to uncover the mysteries of their personal learning. Active learners creatively look at contexts and ask: What might work best here? How should I react to this milieu? How should I respond to new information? Active learners pay keen attention to the here and now and the sub-structures of context. They are aware of the tools that are at their disposal for specific learning tasks, and they are responsive to the changing nature of learning contexts. They seek out idiosyncracies of a learning situation as well as their reaction to them, and they store mental notes for the future. They are likely to ask: What inferences can I draw from this that will help me the next time I face a similar situation?

Whereas under-developed and immature learners are more likely to be passive and less efficient in learning situations (De Corte, 1990b), active learners tend to be fluent with several learning strategies and are versatile with their applications. Active learners are more likely to experiment with new learning strategies and take risks. Because of their inquiring dispositions, active learners self-monitor and self-evaluate their progress. For example, active learners assess ways to be taught and select those most conducive to their learning needs. Other strategies include critiquing the systemic processes of their self-directed learning, and seeking feedback from others regarding their effectiveness in collaborative learning. They seek ways to "lubricate learning." That is, they scrutinize learning situations for solutions that might decrease the friction of personal learning processes and overcome their inertia.

Expanding the learner's repertoire of learning strategies

People increase their efficiency and effectiveness as learners when they can apply a full array of learning skills, strategies, and tools. Learners need to be adaptive to diverse learning contexts. Strategic learners can recognize the demands of a learning situation and inventory probable remedies. They have identified and refined deliberate tactics that can be employed for effectiveness and efficiency (Reynolds and Wade, 1986).

On the other hand, some individuals are paralyzed in certain contexts because of their narrow band of learning strategies. There is an old expression, "When you only have a hammer, the whole world looks like a nail." The expression implies that one's world-view is delimited by personal resources. If you only have a hammer, then you will probably use it in every possible situation, regardless of the fit between the tool and the task.

In like fashion, if individuals rely on merely a few learning strategies, then they are likely to over-use them and apply them in inappropriate situations. Furthermore, certain learning contexts are likely to be avoided by ill-equipped learners. They may consider their existing learning strategies to be impotent against the risks and peculiar aspects of an ambiguous learning task.

Possessing a limited range of learning strategies can be intimidating for people who are confronted with unfamiliar situations. Joyce(1981) noted the repercussions for learners in formal learning situations when they have not developed an expansive repertoire of learning strategies:

To the extent that we have not been taught the skills that enable us to adapt to a new approach we are deprived of learning in a serious way. People who have trouble relating to non-directive approaches are deprived of many of the benefits of counseling. People who cannot relate to models requiring social skills lose out in important areas of learning. Unless we have the skills of inductive thinking, Inquiry oriented models leave us behind. Without the ability to relinquish control we fail to profit from behavioral systems approaches. (26)

Learning strategies enable one to recognize personal learning blind spots, hindrances, and learning deficiencies. Learning strategies can be used as mental prostheses that can prop-up the learner against the demands of the learning task. They permit people to take stock of the actions that embellish their learning in a variety of contexts, whether or not the situation is tedious, risky, solitary, confrontational, mundane or collaborative.

Learners with a broad array of learning strategies use techniques such as rehearsing before a learning event, anticipating elements of the learning event based on prior experience and knowledge; and considering courses of action, potential outcomes, and respective implications. Learners with these skills have developed an advanced arsenal and a sophisticated system for deploying learning tools and strategies. Using metacognitive strategies as an example, Schmitt and Newby (1986) describe this self-regulatory process as "... checking and evaluating to determine whether the task matches preconceived notions about it, whether selected strategies are working, whether task performance is adequate, or whether comprehension is proceeding as it should." (30)

Compensating for personal learning deficiencies

Sometimes learning flows naturally, and other times it flows like molasses in the dead of winter. Learning to learn entails recognizing the causes and effects of peak learning, as well as developing coping strategies for mental blocks, blind-spots, and other barriers. People learn how to learn as they gain understanding, exert control over their learning, and cultivate their learning competencies. However, learners can face numerous stumbling blocks. Collins (1994) outlined a variety of situations that can frustrate learners, and yet, these problematic encounters provide fertile ground for applying learning to learn:

- Learning in a particular context and having difficulties generalizing to other situations.
- Learning to do things one way and having trouble picking up other methods.
- Becoming accustomed to a specific situation and not knowing how to apply expertise to unfamiliar situations.
- Losing motivation because of ambiguity of potential applications in unfamiliar contexts.
- Overcoming inertness because the learning situation is so different from day-to-day experiences.
- Retaining information is difficult because it is rarely put to use.

The preceding learning dilemmas call for a self-monitoring process that allows people to make informed judgements about the best strategies for specific learning situation.

Self-monitoring should trigger a realization when learning is not particularly efficient or effective. Furthermore, learners should be able to recognize inefficient and unproductive learning and take corrective action with appropriate tools and processes.

Building Skills in Self-Monitoring and Reflection

Building competence as a learner requires alertness to the processes of learning. People can "keep tabs" of the processes by self-questioning, monitoring and regulating their learning. A system of executive thinking must emerge that questions the parameters of learning: What is working right now? What is the reason for this action? How does this compare to where I want to be as a learner? What inferences can I make about this success or failure? How can I justify my response to this encounter?

During the self-questioning process, learners articulate the learning processes as they occur and create a critical consciousness of the process: What are the underlying assumptions here? Why am I not getting this? Why is this always difficult for me? How can I enhance this reflection experience?

Reflection and self-monitoring link together the senses of feeling and thinking. People face emotional issues as well as cognitive issues when they acquire new information (Shepard and Fasco, 1994). The assemblage of beliefs that helps learner navigate their environments has been put together from personal experience. This personal reality has shaped the uniqueness of the individual. Learning to learn includes taking stock of one's personal experience and monitoring the effects of emotions on learning processes.

Facilitating Learning to Learn

Facilitating learning to learn includes helping people become aware of their habits as learners. This includes examining the root causes of learning habits, critiquing their validity, and devising new strategies worthy of experimentation and testing. These functions are not automatically applied by most people in formal learning situations, although Armour-Thomas and Allen (1993) noted that competence can be gained in learning to learn if awareness and use of processes are explicitly encouraged and reinforced through facilitation. Practice benefits learning to learn.

Reflective writing can be used as a facilitation strategy for learners. Reflection-learning journals and autobiographies can help individuals critique and examine their learning processes. They are tools that can extend learning. Reflecting on one's experience as a learner helps one to recognize the genesis of idiosyncracies of learning (Shepard and Fasco, 1994). Surfacing these habits allows one to analyze and make adjustments as a learner. The journaling process can "prime the pump" and generate a flow of consciousness for people who are struggling to capture the essence of their learning. Facilitators can respond to reflective journals by providing alternative ideas, metaphors, suggestions for further reading, and other constructive recommendations.

Not all adults will benefit from creating reflective journals, particularly those who struggle with the process of writing. However, the reflective process need not result in the written word. Harri-Augstein and Thomas (1983) endorsed the "learning conversation" as a reflective process for the learner--a technique of conversing with oneself about the processes of learning. They noted that learners can talk through their processes of attributing meaning to learning encounters: Most people are almost totally unaware of how they attribute personal meaning to the displays of public knowledge offered to them in lectures, laboratories, seminars, and work places. Reading, listening, talking, writing, thinking, feeling, judging, deciding, and doing are long established habits that have become so fixed and unavailable to conscious review that learners are almost entirely prisoners of their rigid competencies. (39)

For many adults, beliefs about themselves as learners rest in sub-conscious levels of the brain. Seeing one's reflective thoughts through the eyes of another person can be a catalyst for learning to learn. Talking through their learning processes with another person can help learners uncover underlying beliefs and assumptions that they hold about themselves as learners (Shepard and Fasco, 1994).

In formal learning situations, reciprocal teaching strategies such as summarizing, questioning, clarifying, paraphrasing, and predicting allow learners to view the processes of learning from different angles. These tactics help learners gather information before, during, and after the learning task. This includes information that can help them choose learning strategies, allocate time and/or energy, or alter their course of action in mid-stream. An important role for adult educators in formal learning situations is to help people relate to a broader spectrum of learning environments and expand their repertoire of learning strategies (Joyce, 1981). An example that can be cited here is helping students learn from text. Brown, Campione and Day (1981) devised a four point model for helping students learn from text by considering the following components:

- The learning activities: Monitoring the strategies, rules, procedures, and comprehension.
- Characteristics of the learner: Overcoming capacity limitations, activating one's prior knowledge, and reasoning by analogy.
- Nature of the materials: Examining the text for the logical structure of the material. How are headings, lead sentences, summaries and other cues used to give the reader guide-posts for understanding?
- Criteria tasks: Gaining an understanding of purpose of the learning activity. Understanding that expected outcomes will require different learning approaches and activities.

Learners respond to elements of a learning situation according to their field dependency of field independency. Adult educators who structure learning climates for students need to consider the skills and abilities of learners in various contexts. For example, some learners will be receptive to guidance and direction. In contrast, other learners will cherish their independence as learners. Joughin (1992) suggested that adult educators should consider the following learner

characteristics:

- **Structure:** Learners can be expected to vary according their need for external structure, their response to provided structure, and their ability to create structure where none is provided.
- **Analytical ability:** Learners should be expected to show marked differences in their ability to master situations in which either the content of learning or the structure/process of the learning situation calls for a high level of analytical ability.
- **Responsiveness to affective considerations:** Learners will vary in their need for supportive environments, in their capacity to use relationships with fellow learners and educators, and in their ability to learn from social or interpersonal situations.
- **Authority/responsibility:** Learners should be expected to show varying responses to authority in terms of their readiness to attribute authority to others, their comfort or discomfort in the face of authority, and their willingness and ability to accept personal responsibility for their learning. (13)

Creating Supporting Learning Environments

De Corte (1990a) maintained that powerful learning environments typically combine a balance of discovery learning and personal exploration on the one hand, and systematic instruction and guidance on the other. Individual differences in abilities, needs and motivation of learners must be considered in the balance. Supportive learning environments should contain structured activities that provide insight about the processes of learning to both the learner and the facilitator.

The feasibility of creating supportive learning environments is enhanced when key stakeholders acknowledge the centrality of learning to the mission of the institution. O'Banion (1995-6) used the term "learning college" to describe radical changes he sought in community colleges. He asserted that formal learning experiences should be planned and implemented to benefit learners rather than institutions and staffs. He noted that policies and standard operating procedures must be critically examined and judged for their peripheral relationship to learning. An example of such an assessment evolved from round-table discussions at Maricopa Community College, Phoenix, Arizona. This restructuring process resulted in a set of four concepts devoted to building a learning-centered system (O'Banion, 1995-6):

- Learning is a process that lifelong for everyone and should be measured in a consistent, ongoing manner focused on improvement.
- Everyone is an active learner and teacher through collaboration, shared responsibility, and mutual respect.
- The learning process includes the larger community through the development of alliances, relationships, and opportunities for mutual benefit.
- Learning occurs in a flexible and appropriate environment. (21)

Haverkamp (1983) summarized that for adults to succeed in institutional learning settings they should: (1) know about the services and programs of the learning environment, (2) know

how to assess, understand and improve themselves as learners, and (3) know how to learn in a variety of situations-formal class, small group or alone.

Concluding thoughts

Learning to learn is an umbrella concept that subsumes topics such as metacognition and metacognitive strategies, learning styles, awareness of self as learner, learning contexts and a host of other issues related to improving the effectiveness and efficiency of learning. Learning to learn can be viewed as a goal, process, and area of inquiry (Smith, 1982). It is a vitally important skill for growing and developing as a lifelong learner.

How does one become proficient in learning to learn? How does one gain competence as a learner regardless of the context? This paper stressed the importance of skill building by the learner and facilitation by the adult educator. For the individual learner, skills and processes such as self-awareness, self-monitoring, reflection, and active learning were highlighted. For the facilitator, building supportive learning environments and providing ample practice opportunities for learners were recommended.

This writer believes there is something bigger than the previously mentioned processes and skills that engender learning to learn. It is something holistic and it encompasses the ways that learners approach learning situations with people, things and ideas in their environment. The more one examines the theory and practice of learning to learn, the more one senses that it exalts a unique worldview that is premised on the power of learning.

When people embrace the concept of learning to learn, they observe and interpret phenomena with a heightened consciousness. Their learning processes are the target of personal critique and continuous improvement. For these learners, merely seeking expected outcomes from learning is not good enough. The processes of learning are scrutinized: Can I be better at this? Why is this a struggle? what might work here? Although perfection as a learner is never achieved, when one becomes accomplished in learning to learn, the world never appears the same

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